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THERE ARE NO "CONVERTS" IN JUDAISM

By Rabbi Moshe ben Asher, Ph.D. & Magidah Khulda bat Sarah

Intermarried families now constitute a significant and growing proportion of the congregational memberships in the Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, and Renewal movements of Judaism. In many congregations, more than half of the families are intermarried. While the presence of these families may strengthen congregational community life in a variety of ways, they also pose unique challenges and concerns.

Certainly we want to recognize intermarried families in our congregations, respecting their choices and religious commitments insofar as they are not destructive to Judaism, to Jewish congregational life, or to the Jewish people. To do so requires particularly careful and sensitive consideration of the nuanced issues raised by intermarriage.

Withal, rabbis and congregational leaders typically hope that eventually some of the non-Jewish spouses—those well suited to Judaism and Jewish life, from their point of view and ours—will become Jews.

Discrimination by Fellow Jews

Although several understandable reasons have been given as to why more non-Jewish intermarried spouses have not converted, one significant influence has received relatively little public attention. We are acutely aware of it because, given what we have seen and heard, we have felt compelled to warn people who are considering conversion to Judaism about the likely behavior of some other Jews. Specifically that, once the individual becomes Jewish, he or she will almost certainly experience not only anti-Semitism by non-Jews, but also unexpected and unwarranted discrimination by fellow Jews—simply because of not being born Jewish.

Obviously, we're not alone in observing that some Jews who are usually kind, thoughtful, and respectful of others, treat those among us who converted to Judaism as if they have less value, as if they have less than human feelings, as if they are less Jewish. Anyone who is active in a Jewish congregation and considering conversion to Judaism has the same opportunity as we have had to observe such behavior, which continues virtually unchallenged and unchecked. We have seen personally and heard indirectly of many such situations in which individuals who were born Jewish felt free to inflict embarrassment and pain on others who had chosen to be Jewish, and apparently this kind of behavior occurs in every congregation, although we understand that it's practically unknown among the Orthodox.

Once when visiting an unaffiliated but mostly "reform" congregation, a Jewish member of the congregation approached us at the *oneg*, ironically the time of "*enjoyment*" after services, and wept openly as she told us of her pain and disappointment. She had been singled out and treated differently, told by other women in the congregation that she couldn't participate in kitchen activities, because she had not been born Jewish.

Another time we were at a Conservative synagogue's potluck lunch after Shabbat services during some table talk about a verse in the *parasha* (weekly Torah reading). At one point, a woman who was born Jewish said to another woman she obviously believed to be a Jew by choice, "This *shikseh* [non-Jewish woman] knows everything!"

On several occasions we have seen individuals whom we knew to have been born Jewish repeatedly ask pointed background questions of someone—where the person grew up, the family's congregational affiliation, when the person became bar or bat mitzvah, and so on—and then reveal a barely disguised satisfaction when the person they were interrogating was "outed" as not born Jewish.

We observed one such episode during a job interview panel conducted by a senior rabbi and congregation president. The rabbi repeatedly asked

indirect questions seemingly designed to determine if the job applicant had converted to Judaism, and then, frustrated by the individual's unwillingness to take the bait, finally blurted out, "Were you *born* Jewish?"

At a Yom Kippur service we saw a member of a congregation who was born Jewish, approach another person and ask, "Are you Jewish?" When the person answered, "Yes," the questioner seemed surprised and then, after hesitating a moment, said, "No—I mean, were you *born* Jewish?"

And we recently learned of what seems to be a common experience for Jews who have converted to Judaism: a woman who, 25 years after her acceptance as a Jew by a *bet din* (rabbinic court)—now a Hebrew teacher, Torah reader, etc.—was referred to as a "Jew by choice" when called by her rabbi to read Torah on Yom Kippur. Her reaction: "When will I ever be just a Jew?"

Torah Teaches Not to Taunt

What does the Torah teach us about how we are to treat Jews who have converted to Judaism?

In one of the many *mitzvot* (commandments) on the subject, we read: "A stranger you shall not taunt or oppress, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." (Exodus 22:20)

Our commentators note that "stranger" refers here to one who has converted to Judaism, but also includes anyone who may feel uncomfortable in an unfamiliar environment. The root of the word that we translate as "taunt," *tohneh* (תונה), is י-נ-ה, which means to take illegally something material or spiritual—an example of the latter being to vex someone with words in a social situation, which connotes taking advantage of weakness and is closely related to the root נ-ה-ה, to cause pain. The root of the word translated as "oppress," *tilkhazehnu* (תלחצנו), is ל-ח-ץ, which means to restrict, squeeze, or crush, and is closely related to the roots ל-ח-ש and ל-ע-ז, to whisper and ridicule, respectively.

In the previous verse, Exodus 22:19, we read: "Whoever sacrifices to any god, except to God alone, shall be separated from life." The idea is that a *native-born* Jew loses his or her Jewish citizenship when he or she departs from the Torah's standard of monotheism. But in contrast, in Exodus 22:20, someone who *converts to Judaism*, regardless of background, has the same legal rights of citizenship in the Jewish people as any other Jew.

In the words of Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888), the lesson is that "… It is not race, not birth or country or property, altogether nothing external or due to chance, but simply and purely the inner spiritual and moral worth of the human being that gives him [or her] all the rights of [hu]man[kind] and of a [Jewish] citizen."

Maimonides (Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, 1135-1204, known as Rambam) taught that, "Loving a convert … [fulfills] two positive commandments: one because he [or she] is included among the 'neighbors' [whom we are commanded to love] and one because he [or she] is a convert and the Torah (Deuteronomy 10:19) states: 'and you shall love the converts'." (Hilchot De'ot 6:4)

After Moses told his father-in-law, Yitro, about the miracles God had performed—the exodus from Egypt, parting the sea, and manna from heaven—Yitro decided to become a Jew. But he felt a "pang at heart" when Moses told him that the Egyptians had perished at the sea. So the tradition teaches that, "no one should scoff at a heathen before [i.e., in the presence of] a proselyte who is not a Jew of ten generations standing." (Mekhilta Yitro 1, 58b-59a) In short, we are to be extremely careful of the pain we may cause another Jew by reminding him or her of the past.

The Midrash also teaches that, "… even an idolater who becomes a proselyte and studies the Torah is like a high priest." (Numbers Rabbah 13:15) And the Midrash asks, "Who would have expected Ruth, a proselyte, to attain to the sovereignty over Israel [through David, her descendant]?" (Genesis Rabbah 88:7) It was Ruth's spiritual and moral character that influenced Israel's future, not her past as a Moabite.

What is the *halakhic* status of those who convert to Judaism and what are our *halakhic* obligations to them?

One who is not born Jewish "receives full and complete equality" as soon as he or she concludes the conversion process. (Hirsch comment on Exodus 12:48) Moreover, we are directed to ensure equality of all before the law and to show kindness and consideration to those who are vulnerable. (Hirsch on Deuteronomy 10:19) In effect, we are taught to place the highest value on what a person is worth simply as a person.

The *Sefer haHinnuch*, the thirteenth century Book of [*mitzvah*] Education, teaches: "… we were commanded to bear affection for converts, not to make them suffer about anything whatever…." It goes on to say that, "Among the laws of the precept, there is what the Sages of blessed memory taught [Bava Metzia 58b]: that a man should not in any way tell a proselyte, 'Remember your original activities'." (Deuteronomy 10:19)

Moreover, we read in Deuteronomy (33:4), at the conclusion of the Torah, as Moses is blessing the people before he dies, that, "The Torah that Moses commanded us is the heritage of the congregation of Jacob." That is, it is the *morasha* (complete possession— מורשה) of the entire people, including not only those who were born to Jewish parents, but every soul that joins the Jewish people by pledging loyalty to the Torah.

Incidentally, the *Sefer haHinnuch* reminds us that Tanakh (Hebrew Bible) includes literally dozens of cautions, estimates range from 24 to 46, against oppressing with words one who has converted to Judaism.

The dean of our biblical commentators, Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak, 1040-1105), comments on Exodus 22:20 to warn that, "If you taunt him [the proselyte], he can also taunt you and say to you, 'You too emanate from strangers.' Do not reproach your neighbor with a fault that is also yours."

Disadvantaging with Words

Rabbeinu Bachya (Rabbi Bachya ben Asher, 1255-1340) teaches us that *tohneh* (תונה)—which, as we have already noted, is translated as "taunt—refers to "disadvantaging" another person with words.

It prompts us to ask, should one feel disadvantaged if singled out as a "convert," instead of simply being accepted as another Jew? Can you imagine ways in which one is disadvantaged if "outed" as not born Jewish?

Imagine that you were not born Jewish, if in fact that's not the case, and every time someone introduces you, they mention that you're a "convert." How would you feel—possibly more vulnerable than if simply introduced as a *landsman* (i.e., a fellow Jew, from one's town or country)?

It may help to understand such feelings of vulnerability by considering some assumptions made by people who are born Jewish about those who have converted to Judaism—all of which are contradicted by well known studies:

- That those who have converted to Judaism are not as well educated as the average Jew.
- That those who have converted are not as committed to Judaism and congregational life as the average Jew.
- That those who have converted are less competent to establish a Jewish home and family life than the average Jew.

In what way is someone who has converted more vulnerable or disadvantaged, not only in feeling but also in fact, than one who was born Jewish?

A person who converted to Judaism typically doesn't have a wide circle of Jewish relatives and friends. So if we mistreat the Jew by choice with verbal abuse, intimidation, one-upmanship, subtle put-downs, religious caste discrimination, or outright social exclusion, he or she is much more likely to be isolated and without allies and defenders, unable to respond without confirming the very second-class status implicitly imposed.

What options does a Jew-by-choice have if someone who was born Jewish wants to "out" him or her?

- Refuse to answer pointed questions about personal history, appearing to be secretive about one's status as a Jew, thus confirming suspicions that one is a "convert."
- Respond to pointed personal history questions and allow oneself to be outed, and thus be openly singled out as other than "just Jewish."
- Reprove one's interrogator to convey that outing people who have converted is forbidden, without acknowledging or denying that one has converted, and thus risk alienating that person and confirming his or her suspicions.

But none of these options are satisfactory because they all have the effect of confirming one as a "convert"—not *fully* Jewish in some sense. The situation illuminates why in general we don't hear Jews-by-choice talking about this problem and their painful experiences related to it, because to do so would only single them out as different and somehow less Jewish.

Oppression & Empathy

What are some of the more egregious but less obvious consequences of verbally oppressing those who have converted to Judaism?

We discourage and alienate others who might be considering conversion to Judaism. We run the risk of driving them and their families away from Jewish life altogether. We desensitize ourselves to the oppression of others who are vulnerable and who trust and depend on us. We incrementally lose self-control and condition ourselves to accept and perpetuate the oppression of others who are vulnerable. We inadvertently model oppressive behavior into which we unwittingly socialize our children. And we run the risk of *chillul Hashem*, desecrating the name of Am Yisrael, and thus potentially causing pain and loss to the whole Jewish people.

Obviously, the solution is not with those who have converted but with those of us who were born Jewish. It is our responsibility to recognize the destructive effects of singling out Jews-by-choice and to do what we can to stop the practice.

Why should we be empathetic toward and supportive of Jews who have converted to Judaism, reproving those who make a practice of outing them?

- First, because, as the Torah says, we—the Jewish people—were strangers in Egypt, and we suffered accordingly.
- Second, because the history of the Jewish Diaspora—the worldwide dispersion of the Jews—is mostly a story of our suffering as strangers.
- Third, because even today we are singled out and suffer, defined as the aliens in the global community and targeted because we are Jews.

The concluding phrase of Exodus 22:20, that we were "strangers in the land of Egypt," according to Rabbi Hirsch, reminds us that our national misfortune in Egypt derived from our vulnerability, that we were without rights, and it should make us mindful of the consequences for us and those who oppressed us—highlighting particularly our own potential as oppressors if we limit the rights of others.

The subtext of Exodus 22:20 is that the Torah aims to inculcate spiritual, moral and intellectual values for measuring the worth of another human

being. The current popularity of placing excessive value on position, prestige, possessions, power, and even physique, ultimately is a source of inequality and inhumanity.

Tradition's Path

In the final analysis, when one accepts the Torah and, in turn, is accepted as a Jew by a *bet din*, complete equality is achieved with those who came out of Egypt and stood at Mount Sinai—according to the *halakhah*, the path set out for us by our tradition.

We are directed not to call attention to Jews who have chosen to live by the Torah of Israel. We are directed not to separate and single out those who have chosen to be Jewish from those who were born Jewish. And we are directed not to remind Jews-by-choice of a prior life, lifting up their pain or shame, or to withhold any honor, privilege, or kindness because of their past.

In effect, there are no "converts" in Judaism—only Jews. And the sooner each of us acts to build up the culture of our congregation to reflect this understanding, the sooner we will have removed a significant obstacle to conversion to Judaism by our non-Jewish attendees.

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